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Article

Student Attitudes on Correcting in L2 Conversations

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Introduction

Oral Communication classes at a university are often a challenge for teachers and students. Teachers usually meet with each class once a week, 14 or 15 times a semester, and students often do not use English during their Spring and Summer breaks. Students often find studying a second language a complex challenge. In the students' minds they are likely balancing their future need of the language along with their more urgent needs of the moment such as their club activities or part-time jobs. Amongst these constraints it is obvious teachers need to be prepared and have a clear pedagogical direction in order to give the students a chance to use and improve their English.

One important objective of the Oral Communication Strategies (OCS) course in the School of Contemporary International Studies (SCIS) at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS) is to have students speak in English in extended conversations. Second Language Acquisition theory supports the importance of classroom interaction and learning. Trimino (1993) defined a basic principle of second language acquisition as “the need to negotiate meaning in any situation

of language acquisition.” According to Lightbrown (2003), learners need the chance to speak for meaning. Just practicing drills and memorizing language beyond their current level of development can lead to mixed results, including the “U-shaped” behavior where their accuracy can rise and drop depending as they try to produce language. Mackey, Gass, and McDonough (2000) found that there was a correlation between interaction and development and “learners who were more actively involved in the interaction produced more developmentally advanced structures than learners who did not take part in any interaction...” Swain also supports interaction and learning with her Output Hypothesis which claims that “the act of producing language (speaking or writing) constitutes, under certain circumstances, part of the process of second language learning.”

OCS classes in the SCIS department as NUFS require speaking time for students in pairs or dyads. A typical class consists of the teacher going over the topic from the book. Next, a conversation or story from the text is used to model the topic and to introduce language. The class also includes the introduction of conversation strategies which are likely related to the language used in the topic of the lesson. Finally, students are put into small groups or pairs and talk about the topic for about 5 minutes before changing partners. The teacher is monitoring the students or joining conversations and can teach language or grammatical points to the class between conversations. The class continues in this fashion until the students have spoken with five or six partners for a minimum of 30 minutes.

In this type of approach, students are using English actively and in meaningful situations. Most students’ conversational abilities show improvement and this appears to be an effective way to teach a second language but by just observing our students, we can only understand what we see. In this paper I would like to

get a better understanding of how students are communicating with each other and more specifically how they are correcting each other's mistakes when there are breakdowns in communication. In order to better understanding of this, I took a survey with questions designed to have students explain their actions and beliefs about L2 communication problems with each other.

Survey (see appendix)

I conducted this survey in four 2nd year OCS classes and two 1st year OCS classes. I obtained the permission to use the results in my research and 75 students participated. The survey included multiple choice, yes-no questions, and written answer questions. The questions of the survey were aimed at finding student attitudes about correcting each others' mistakes.

Results and Analysis:

Q1: *When you are talking with your partner or partners in OCS class, are you aware of your partner correcting your speaking mistakes?*

More than half the students choose "Sometimes" as their answer and only 6 students choose "always". It seems students are aware of being corrected but realize they are not totally aware.

Q2: *Is it important the way your partner corrects your mistakes?*

Out of 75 students, 38 circled "Very important" and 34 circled "Important." Some students seem to sense the importance of being corrected but were not so concerned with form. Some comments include, "To correct my mistakes, it leads to improve my English skills, so it is important." Also, "Because if no one corrects my mistakes, I can't improve in this class" Other comments showed the way is important too, "Softly like 'Do you mean...?' or 'I think it is better...'" Another student said, "We can be aware of points which I wasn't aware (of)". Finally this student wrote, "We can learn from each other."

Q3: *How long do you usually remember the correction your partner gave you?*

Nearly half the students chose “The rest of the class” as their answer. Although it is good to see students can remember what their partner is correcting them, it would be preferable to see more long term results.

Q4: *Are you aware of different ways that students can correct each other?*

In looking at the results of this question, it appears students are unaware of strategies for correcting each other. This was a yes-no question with 52 students answering “No”. Only one student gave an example (Q5) of knowing any different ways of correcting. He/She wrote, “pointing (out) wrong words...teaching comprately (complete) sentence.”

Q5: *How often do you correct a speaking mistake your partner makes?*

The most common answer to this question was “Not very often” followed by “Sometimes”. Apparently students are not correcting each other’s mistakes most of the time.

Q6: *Do you ever hear your partner make a speaking mistake and not correct it?*

The results of this question show that sometimes students are not correcting each other at all. Most students (52) circled “Yes” in response to this question. Reasons for not correcting their partner appear to be problems with personal confidence or cultural reasons. Some examples were: “I don’t have a confidence”, “I talk without thinking”, “I’m afraid that my partner might feel bad or shamed”, “...I don’t know how to correct”, and “because I think rude to my partner.”

Q7: *If your partner corrects your mistake, do you trust him/her?*

Almost all students circled “Yes”. This could possibly be explained that students only correct each other when they are confident they are correct and in that case they regard the other student’s correction as correct.

Q8: *When you reach a point in your conversation where you can't communicate what you want to say, what do you?*

The most common answer to this question was "Try to say it in other words." This is encouraging as students are negotiating in L2.

There were many reasons given for each answer and some of them are listed by the corresponding answer.

Speak in Japanese:

"Because partner is Japanese."

"I want to communicate with friends."

"I don't know to express in English I want to say."

"I want to tell the point exactly."

"Because I don't come up with other word soon. It takes long time. Give up."

Try to say it in other words:

"I think I should avoid using Japanese and I'm trying to make natural conversation."

"I try to speak English as much as possible."

"Rephrasing is one of the studying."

"I don't want to suspend conversation and I want to communicate in English."

"I think trying to say it in other words helps me to improve my English."

Gesture:

"If I use dictionary, its words are difficult."

"Gesture is easy to express my feeling."

"Because gesture can be understood by everyone."

Look up something in the dictionary:

"Dictionary is right!"

"It's easy to find."

"It must be exact and learn more new words."

Discussion and Implications

In order for students to be able to communicate naturally with each other and to convey meaning, there is a need to correct each other's mistakes. Inevitable breakdowns in communication leave one partner confused about what is being said or worse—complete lack of understanding. In looking at the results of this survey, it appears students are somewhat aware of corrections. However, they do not seem to be aware of different ways of correcting each other. They also seem to have some reasons, other than language that keeps them from correcting each other.

A possible approach to improving this situation is to improve the students' awareness of correcting each other. For example, a teacher could make a demonstrational video with some students using the various correctional moves in natural conversations. Activities could be developed to listen or identify certain strategies as they occur in the conversations. Student generated conversations would likely be easier to understand because they would be closer to the speaking level of the other students (see Murphey and Arao for discussion of near peer role modeling).

Another apparent problem that was often cited in this survey was the students' lack of confidence. Teachers need to consider the context and background of students. Most students in the SCIS department have come up through the educational system in Japan that placed an emphasis on perfection. This striving for perfection can have a reverse effect on a student's confidence if they are too worried about making or correcting mistakes. Oral Communication classes offer students a chance to make mistakes and learn from their mistakes. By creating an environment where students are free to learn and grow, their confidence can be nurtured and ultimately their communicative abilities can improve.

Appendix

Survey: Student Attitudes on Correcting Each Other

1. When you are talking with your partner or partners in OCS class, are you aware of your partner correcting your speaking mistakes?										Total (minus no answers)	
Always	6	Sometimes	48	Not very often	20	Never	1	75			
2. Is it important the way your partner corrects your mistakes?											
Very important	38	Important	35	Not so important	1	Not at all	74	No Answer	1		
3. How long do you usually remember the correction your partner gave you?											
The rest of the year	4	The rest of the semester	23	The rest of the class	34	A few minutes	10	71	No Answer	3	
4. Are you aware of different ways that students can correct each other?											
Yes	17	No	52				69	No Answer	6		
5. How often do you correct a speaking mistake your partner makes?											
Always	3	Sometimes	31	Not very often	37	Never	1	72	No Answer	3	
6. Do you ever hear your partner make a speaking mistake and not correct it?											
Yes	52	No	13				65	No Answer	10		
7. If your partner corrects your mistake, do you trust him/her?											
Yes	69	No	1	Yes AND No (circled both)	3		73	No Answer	2		
8. When you reach a point in your conversation where you can't communicate what you want to say, what do you?											
Speak in Japanese	15	Try to say it in other words	24	Gesture	16	Look up in your dictionary	7	75	No Answer		
Other	Multiple answers		13								

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